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In the Shadow of Borat

Gayane Torosyan

Kazakhstan has become an international punch line thanks to *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Gregorian, 2007). But the Kazakhs “are not willing to let the joke be on them.” The tabloid *New York Post* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* report that President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s relatives are buying multi-million-dollar apartments in New York City, getting into Ivy League schools, and suing American companies for underestimating their intellectual worth (Farrell, 2007). Aside from author Sacha Baron Cohen, the only people who seem to “make benefit” from this sort of “cultural learnings” are the former Soviet “oligarchs,” or tycoons, who harvest free publicity at the expense of the distorted images of their exploited countrymen (Lesova, 2006). Cohen’s mockumentary has been so widely publicized that the name “Borat” has come close to being perceived as a common noun. Because of this popularity, there is no question about the power of the film’s impact on audiences. Understanding the nature of that impact is the topic of this article.

Ideological criticism is used as a method of rhetorical analysis of *Borat*, with postmodernism as a theoretical framework that Foss (1996) recommends for its ability to explain the lack of unifying discourse and the fragmented nature of the context of this media text. Postmodern theory informs this study through the notion that contemporary culture has transformed radically by the domination of the media and technology that bring about new forms of communication and representation (Foss, 1996, p.293.). Fragmentation of individuals and communities, a consumer lifestyle, and a sense of alienation are the underlying canvas through which audiences perceive and process the message of the film. The hypothesis is that through his mockumentary, Cohen tackles a number of problems including racism, sexism, superstition, and poverty that truly exist in the countries of the former Socialist Bloc and worldwide, but because of its inaccuracy and factual frivolity, the film misses the point and remains overly superficial, vulgar and erroneous even for the genre of satire.

Preliminary Focus Group Analysis

Although the character of Borat Sagdiyev, a fictional Kazakhs television reporter commissioned to file features for his home network on “typical British life” emerged on Channel 4 Television in Great Britain in 1998 (Howell, 2006), the project materialized as a full-length film only a few years later. Directed by Larry Charles and distributed by 20th Century Fox, the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* premiered at the 2006 Toronto International Film festival (Reuters Movie News, 2006). The technique used in the film is similar to Ali G’s: a series of spoof interviews with unsuspecting individuals who were “unaware that the whole thing had been set up and that it was they who were the real source of the comedy. The humor arose from the innocent confronting the expert and ending up in glorious and mutual incomprehension” (Howell, 2006, p.157).

The wide release of *Borat* on video happened at a convenient time during the Fall 2006 academic semester when Mass Communication students at the State University of New York College at Oneonta were viewing excerpts from various motion pictures as part of their learning about screenwriting and on-air use of language. Aside from a few laughs, the film did not trigger much reaction from the group of 40-odd students, let alone discussion or debate of any significance. The students said it seemed to lack a point, but even if it had one, cultural confusion and vulgarity prevented them from understanding it.

In September 2007, a series of focus group sessions were conducted with three groups of students at the same school, the average number of participants in each session was 15, and some of them also selected *Borat* as their topic of discussion in a short essay assignment. Focus group discussions and written responses show that while accepting the genre of the movie as satire, most students agree that it actually enforces racial and ethnic stereotypes such as “middle easterners have a hard time adjusting in a Western society because they are not used to developed technology,” “women in countries like Kazakhstan are treated poorly,” while in America women “have it really good,” and “men treat women as their property in those countries.”

The majority of students stated that the film did not teach them anything about the former Soviet Union, but some of them ended up extrapolating some of its satirical claims over their perceived image of that part of the world.

To a certain limit, my views of the former Soviet Union have changed. The quality of life was a lot more of a third world situation than I imagined. Women in Kazakhstan have very few rights and are treated more like animals than humans. Ethnic relations were rather disturbing and hateful. The comedy had a fine line drawn between humorous and offensive. The economy of Kazakhstan was a very poor one. I think that Kazakhstani people are primarily Muslim due to the fact of the hatred towards Jewish people.

Some students expressed more skeptical views, saying that the former Soviet Union was portrayed in an “over-the-top, exaggerated, mocking fashion.”

I think Borat was intended to lampoon the culture and perspective of Americans. The way Kazakhstan was depicted was intended to mimic the idea some Americans have when they think of a relatively unknown Eurasian country. Therefore, Borat did not affect the way I look at Kazakhstan because of the nature of the film and the motives behind it.

Most students said they believe Borat to be a Muslim, like the majority of the population of Kazakhstan. Others said the ethnic composition of that country is “unknown.” One of the students expressed concerns about the negative portrayal of Borat as a Muslim character:

In this post 9/11 era I think many Americans are hypersensitive about possible terrorists. Although it is unfair Muslims are looked at as evil and this is due to many factors.

Student responses also indicate that “Borat” skewed their views on intercultural communication and ethnic relations:

It made me think that Kazakhstan ethnic relations are not very strong, Especially with the United States. They have a different culture that is much more European, which is nothing like the American culture and the way we behave towards each other. For example the way we greet each other. They are unfamiliar with our way of life and we are uncomfortable with theirs.

Answering a question about Kazakhstan’s economy, the students unanimously classified it as poor:

I really never had any economic opinions about Kazakhstan because I didn’t really know anything about. However, after seeing the movie I feel that the economy of Kazakhstan is lacking. They are borderline third world country.

The film’s impact on the students’ perception of the status of the economy in the former Soviet Union can be summarized by this comment:

My opinion about economic conditions in Kazakhstan was again, not affected. It was just confirmed.

Other comments describing the film’s impact on the students’ beliefs included statements such as “It made me realize that Kazakhstan is very poor,” “It made me feel that Kazakhstan is against certain minorities,” “...that it was poor and behind in technology,” “It made me feel that their economy sucks,” “Ethnic relations in Kazakhstan were terrible compared to others,” “Mud brick houses are top of the line,” etc.

As a media scholar who was born and raised in the former Soviet Republic of Armenia, I was hoping that the film would provoke more questions among my students about the past and present of that part of the world. Instead of triggering discourse, the film appeared to cause only confusion and misconceptions, ampli-

fied by disgust from certain scenes including bathroom humor and nude wrestling. The exposure to the film resulted in confused and erroneous assumptions cemented in the young minds thanks to the world-wide reputation of the author, whom the students recognized as Ali G (Howells, 2006).

The student responses are only used as a starting point to ask further questions about Cohen's film. A brief rhetorical analysis is conducted to show that despite its claims of "dramatic demonstration of how racism feeds on dumb conformity, such as rabid bigotry" (Reuters Movie News, 2006), the film does very little to support its ambitions as a critique of society at large.

Geopolitics

The first question to ask is what an American viewer can learn from the film: How does Cohen's documentary "make benefit" wide American audiences?

The film aspires to make fun of racism, sexism, and ignorance in a fictional society that the author calls "Kazakhstan," but the choice of this geographic locale leaves the viewer confused about who to condemn for those vices. Given a foreign target and an unknown country to demonize, the viewer's own culture seems immune or at least better compared to on the one depicted in the film. Aside from alienating the so-called Kazakh society together with the entire former Socialist Bloc, the film does very little to support its ambitions as a critique of society at large. Adding to the ambiguity of the message is its lack of educational value. As someone born and raised in the former Soviet Union, I was hoping that the film would provoke questions among my students about the past and present of that part of the world. The results were disappointing.

The film is mostly shot desperately far from Kazakhstan, in Eastern Europe and the United States, with characters including Romanian Gypsies who later sued Cohen for discrimination (The Associated Press, 2006), and the Armenian-American actor Ken Davitian playing Borat's middle-aged manager Azamat Bagatov. The popular Serbo-Croatian composer Goran Bregovic wrote the music for the soundtrack that revolves around Ederlezi, a popular traditional folk song of the Roma minority in former Yugoslavia.

Clearly, geographic correctness was not the purpose of the film, although the credits, unlike the maps, appeared to be in grammatically correct Russian. In fact, the point must have been the opposite—trying to make fun of a non-existing country that strangely resembles so many of the members of the former Socialist block. However, cultural and geographic misconceptions can pass as humor only when directed towards an audience that stands above such errors. A brief call to any of the American phone companies like Sprint, with a simple question such as whether text messages to Armenia are covered within the company's flat-fee program, will reveal the degree of Americans' geographic ignorance. Making subtle fun of that, as Cohen does, is the same as a slipping-on-a-banana joke in front of a person on

crutches. If anything at all, Borat deepens Americans' alienation from the rest of the world.

Economy and ideology

In a “generous” gesture of sparing the feelings of one individual country—in this case, Kazakhstan—the over-generalized Eastern-European location of the film appears to be a statement about the economic conditions and cultural atmosphere prevailing in most of the nations that broke away from the Soviet Union only to find themselves in deeper misery, which came to replace the five-year plans and communist ideology.

The country's economic problems are shown at the very beginning of the narrative, when Borat gives the viewers a tour of his native village, Kuzcek:

Here is my neighbor, Nursultan Tuliagbaev. He's a pain in my assholes. I get a window from a glass – he must get a window from a glass. I get a step—he must get a step. I get a clock radio—he cannot afford! Great success!

Later at the end of the film when Borat reviews the changes that happened after his return, he refers to his neighbor again, this time—with a surprising turn in their competition in the realm of material well-being:

There Nursultan Tuliagbaev. Still asshole. I get iPod—he only get iPod-Mini. Everybody know it's for girls!

This unexpected twist of the plot represents a postmodern technique illustrating the fragmentation of Borat's reality between his country's poverty and the accelerated advent of technology. It fits naturally with the “philosophical” climax of the film, where Borat revises his values by replacing his dreams of “plastic chests” with the real (pumpable) peroxide-blond beauty of the African-American prostitute Luenell. This foreshadows the grotesque finale of Borat and Luenell living happily ever after in Kuzcek.

While things are relatively simple with economy, it takes a little more effort to explain to American college students about the “Gypsy tears” contained in a vile that decorates Borat's neck. Those superstitions are from the same category of alternative belief systems that have popped up like mushrooms, competing against science, in the former Socialist block. It requires a little more than a few vulgar jokes to explain to an American audience how after a long, heavy period of ideological pressure scientific determinism failed together with the socialist system. Free at last, some Soviet intellectuals threw themselves into a frantic and often ignorant mix of religion and superstition, using formerly reputable central media venues such as the weekly newspaper *Argumenti i Fakti* (Arguments and Facts), where “Professor” Ernst Muldashev (2007) claims that the idols of Easter Island are “death chips” sent to Earth by “gods from the underground Shambala” in order to influence the flow of life on this planet “through the introduction of

death.” (Borat one, Muldashev nil, as Cohen’s former countryman David Beckham would put it.)

Thus, Cohen fails to explain the real tragedy of steep intellectual decline that began in some Eastern European countries after the end of Socialism and its government-sponsored science programs by portraying it as primordial ignorance, or as a given. Combining witchcraft with incest and promiscuity, Cohen creates an appalling image of a society that leaves no room for compassion.

Racism

Borat’s self-proclaimed critique of anti-Semitism is lacking proper context for viewers as well. To audiences unfamiliar with the newly acute outburst of nationalism in Russia, it seems directed at racism and xenophobia in general (Tuminez, 2000). As a result of discrimination elevated to the level of national politics, minorities are finding themselves increasingly unwelcome in the former empire’s urban centers such as St. Petersburg and Moscow, where policemen stop dark-skinned or dark-haired individuals, especially men, for no reason other than looks.

In the episode of the film where Borat wants to buy a car, he rehashes a “bearded” Soviet joke that used to make fun of the hunting culture of the Chukchas—the inhabitants of the Chukotka peninsula (Russian Jokes, 2007). While the car dealer introduces the vehicle’s safety features, Borat inquires about the possibility of killing a group of Gypsies by running into them.

If I run into a group of Gypsies with this car, will I kill them? ... What can I do to guarantee to kill them?

Proving Borat right at this particular point, an Armenian man whose name is kept confidential for reasons related to political asylum, got a piece of advice from a Russian woman on the matter of his immigration from St. Petersburg to Los Angeles: “That monkey house is surely the best place for you. A lot of your countrymen live there.”¹ He was recently granted asylum in the United States as a victim of ethnic discrimination of minorities in Russia. It is doubtful that Cohen would understand the depth and complexity of ethnic prejudice penetrating Western societies through post-Soviet immigration. His oversimplified and generalized depiction of flaws in other societies gives American viewers a license to overlook their own problems concerning race and ethnic relations.

Epic hero... NOT

A syntagmatic analysis (Berger, 2000) of the film reveals the parody of its adherence with a typical fairy-tale narrative. The hero, Borat, lives with his family in a small Kazakh village, surrounded by family and friends like any epic hero at the start of the narrative. Borat is unhappy with his wife. At the age of 43, his mother

is the “oldest woman in all of Kuzcek.” His sister is “number four prostitute in all Kazakhstan.”

Together with his sidekick Azamat Bagatov, Borat launches a journey to the “U. S. of A.” with a quest for “cultural learnings.” During the trip, he discovers and tries to “rescue” (or, ironically, kidnap) the “princess”—Pamela Andersen, only to realize that true beauty does not have to be endowed with plastic breasts:

I was humiliated. It was time for me to return to New York, where a ticket was waiting for me to fly home. While sitting on the bus, I thought of my journey over the past few weeks. The great times, the good times, and the shit times. Many there were shit times. I'd come to America to learn lessons for Kazakhstan, but what had I learned? Suddenly I realized: I had learned that if you chase a dream, especially one with plastic chests, you can miss the real beauty in front of your eyes.

One important figure missing from this morphological picture is the villain. In the beginning of the film, while Borat lives in Kazakhstan, the villain has to be the system that created the bundle of problems including economic hardship, misogyny and promiscuity. However, its existence is never revealed or named in any way or fashion, which leaves the audience with the only logical conclusion that the misery is the people's own fault. This assumption is reinforced by the image of a wild crowd beating on a symbolic Jew. The message is clear: the crowd is the villain, and it deserves the misery it lives in for the crime of misogyny against fellow human beings.

Things change dramatically when Borat comes to America, where he encounters a series of challenges, including dinner with members of “high society,” singing the National Anthem at the opening of a rodeo show in Texas, learning how to talk like a member of an African-American youth gang, and staying at a bed-and-breakfast owned by a mature Jewish-American couple.

Borat in the United States

Many American viewers, including students at the State University of New York College at Oneonta, claim that the satire in Cohen's film is directed against narrow-mindedness and bigotry still existing in American society. They notice the dissonance between the people's indifference to Borat's improper behavior, including public defecation and masturbation in front of a Victoria's Secret store window, and their outrage at the friendly foreigner's hearty greeting with his attempts of hugging and kissing strangers on the subway train and the streets of Manhattan. American individualism is taken to an extreme to show its absurdity in the face of a different culture.

While most Americans find Borat hilarious, others express their concerns about stereotyping Muslims as being primitive and promiscuous (xymphora, 2006). Comparing today's anti-Muslim jokes to blackface humor in the 1920s, one blogger implies that cultural hegemony acts as a “modern cloak of prejudice”

that allows Cohen to escape the usual criticism because anti-Muslim bigotry is so indoctrinated in American viewers' minds that it goes unnoticed. The same critic argues that Cohen uses a post-modern "distancing" technique to justify his humor as being "directed at the *reaction* of his redneck audience." This technique allows the audience to "enjoy the anti-Muslim humor while feeling morally superior to the poor rednecks" (xymphora, 2006). It is exemplified in the rodeo scene (CBS News, 2005) where Borat gets instructions from the owner of the premise to shave his moustache that makes him look like a Muslim. Ironically, he later gets booed by an outraged audience for singing that "Kazakhstan is the greatest country in the world," while his absurdly twisted speech on the war in Iraq is accepted almost as normal.

We support your war of terror! May we show our support of our boys in Iraq!
May U. S. of A. kill every single terrorist! May George W. Bush drink the blood
of every single man, woman or child! May we destroy the country so that for the
next one thousand years not a single lizard survives in that desert!

In another episode, Cohen's hero makes fun of the American upper-middle class at the dinner party where Borat receives instructions in dining etiquette while simultaneously "applying" them in practice. One of his pranks takes place immediately after the soft-spoken hostess declares her faith in Borat's cultural reformation:

I think that the cultural differences are vast. And I think he's a delightful man, and
it wouldn't take him very much time to, you know, become Americanized.

Testing the limits of bourgeois hospitality, Borat returns to the table with a white plastic bag full of his excrements. However, this action does not enrage the hostess as much as the appearance of the African-American prostitute Luenell, spontaneously invited to the party by Borat who took a moment of absence from the dinner table to make a phone call. The hostess begins expressing her concern with a delicate hint: "It's getting very, very late and it's time that we end our party and everything..." However, when Borat asks if Luenell can at least stay for desserts, all traces of tact and hospitality are quickly evaporated: "Absolutely not! And neither can you."

The etiquette instructor encourages Borat to act sincerely while paying compliments or showing interest in the guests, and her advice is taken seriously. Borat speaks his mind. By testing the limits of acceptability, he shows that violations of the basic norms of behavior can be forgiven much easier than the breaking of social and class boundaries.

Viewed through the lens of postmodern critique, Cohen's satire targets the disconnected, absurd, and pretentious nature of some aspects of modern society. He uses the same technique of surprising the unsuspecting participants with vulgar bodily humor and "naïve" impropriety both in the Ali G show and in *Borat*, but it may take much longer before audiences become completely desensitized to it.

Conclusion

Overall, the film contains so many unjustified attacks against marginalized groups of society such as women, minorities, and people with disability that its displays of bigotry and anti-Semitism blends in quite naturally instead of shocking the viewers as something terribly wrong. It makes fun of the former Soviet republics without even bothering to know or care about their problems. The mockumentary has the characteristics of a postmodern project where viewers contribute their own interpretive meanings into the reading of the text (Howells, 2006 p. 169). However, *Borat* remains in the satirical genre, but fails to perform its cleansing function as such. It would have been therapeutic if Borat could strike issues such as ethnic and gender discrimination with satire, but a successful assault would require a better target and a better context. In its current form, the film only manages to dismiss those problems altogether as small bits of a bigger, more absurd “reality.”

Instead of curing societal ills through laughter, it simply adds more filth into the mix of contemporary popular culture. One such example is the swearing that accompanies the nude wrestling scene between Borat and his manager. Few people would understand the true meaning of Davitian’s foul language, but those few would know that “che” means simply “no,” and not “up yours,” as the film suggests. For a bilingual Armenian teenager watching it somewhere in Glendale, California (or should we start calling it “the monkey house” just for laughs), the shockingly fresh ascendance of Armenian foul language onto television screens can cause a lot of damage, while contributing no cultural value. Therefore the response of a former Soviet critic to this cultural product is quite unambiguous. Whether translated from “Kazakh” or not, it remains “che.”

Note

¹ Glendale, California, has the largest Armenian population in the United States.

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